

# Religion versus Secularism on Women's Liberation: The Question of Women Liberation and Modern Education

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**Abstract**—The nineteenth century was characterized by major educational reforms in the Arab World. One of the unintended outcomes of colonization in Arab countries was the initiation of women liberation as well as the introduction of modern education and its application in sensitizing people on the rights of women and their liberation. The reforms were often attributed to various undercurrents that took place at different levels within the Ottoman Empire, and particularly the arrival and influence of the Christian missionaries were supported by the American and European governments. These trends were also significantly attributed to the increase in the presence of Europeans in the region, as well as the introduction of secular ideas and approaches related to the meaning of modernity. Using literary analysis as a method, this paper examines the role of an important male figure like the political activist and writer Qāsim Amīn and the religious reformer Muḥammad ‘Abduh in starting this discourse and shows their impact on the emancipation of women movement (*Tahrīr*), and how later women led the movement with their published work. This paper explores Arab Salons and the initiation of women's literary circles. Women from wealthy families in Egypt and Syria who had studied in Europe or interacted with European counterparts began these circles. These salons acted as central locations where people could meet and hold discussions on political, social, and literary trends as they happened each day. The paper concludes with a discussion of current debates between the Islamist and the secularist branches of the movement today. While the Islamists believe that adhering to the core of Islam with some of its contested position on women is a modern ideology of liberation that fits the current culture of modern time Egypt; the secularists argue that the influence that Islam has on the women's liberation movement in Egypt has been a threat to the natural success and progress of the movement, which was initiated in the early nineteenth century independent of the more recent trends towards religiosity in the country.

**Keywords**—Educational model, crisis of terminologies, Arab awakening, nineteenth century.

## I. BACKGROUND

THE nineteenth century was a period of significant economic, social and political transition and was characterized by educational reforms. Such reforms were attributed to various undercurrents that took place at different levels within the Ottoman Empire, which stretched from the *Mashriq* (Greater Syria) to the *Maghrib* (North Africa). [1] At the societal level, the arrival and influence of the Christian missionaries were supported by the American and European governments. It also led to the establishment of a rather formal

system of education for the Arab girls; until this time, girls in the region had either received little or no education at all. [2] Initially, this was conducted in private institutions that attracted wealthy and Christian families, who were willing to enroll their girls to receive a formal education. However, as the schools continued becoming more and more affordable and socially acceptable, the idea of formal education for the girl child was also adopted by the middle class, and eventually reached out to the poor. This led to the rise of a new norm, which soon became prevalent. It became a norm that girls needed to acquire education so that they could afford better marriage prospects. However, the main reason for educating the girl child was to enable them to get a means of educating their children. Unfortunately, women were offered a limited range of subjects. Nonetheless, they seized the opportunity at hand to acquire education, in which they proved their determination and admirable drive. [3] By the middle of the nineteenth century, there was increased awareness as well as an obligation for the social and intellectual consciousness, especially regarding the appreciation of the rights of women and the fight for their voice and equality in the society.

## II. WOMEN AND EDUCATION

One of the key ways through which the Western missionaries contributed to the increasing educational opportunities for women in the Arab world was through the work of Daniel and Abby Maria Bliss. This was an American couple that moved in to stay in Beirut in 1886 and then started the Syrian Protestant College, which was later renamed as the American University of Beirut. [3] In 1905, the university initiated a nursing programme that would allow women to apply and study nursing within the institution. Later in 1924, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences also began admitting female students. This marked rumbling of educational reforms that were taking place within Ottoman. The news also spread to the Sultanate and was later even echoed in institutions. The Ottoman regime sought ways of counteracting the threat posed by the religious and political influence of the Christian missionary schools. [4] The empire had also realized that it could not hope to survive without implementing education of the modern natural sciences. As such, it reacted to these threats by implementing its own reforms. The reforms that were introduced and implemented by the Sultanate barely had any effect on the subjects within the empire. However, the fruits of the reforms became visible by the 1850s and 1860s. It is also notable that another crucial factor that contributed to

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the existence, as well as improvement of women's education during the nineteenth century, and during the early 20th century was the legacy and existence of the European colonialism. Napoleon's short-lived occupation of Egypt between 1798 and 1891 was considered unsuccessful, at least as per the French standards [5]. However, the revolutionary ideas, as well as imports in the education and technology sectors, later proved to be crucial and durable in Egypt as well as other parts of North Africa. During the leadership of Muhammad Ali, who greatly admired the French technology and innovation, there were significant interactions between France and Egypt in various fields such as academic, science, and cultural sectors. [5] It also emerged that during this time, both male and female students were allowed to go abroad to spend time in studies. For instance, Mayy Ziyādah a notable Arab hostess, spent considerable time in France, while Hudā Sha'rāwī, an occasional hostess of salon evenings, would grant scholarships to writers to enable them to study in Europe; she would sponsor their expenses. This time was also marked by increased ideas of feminism and educational reform in various parts of the world. Some of the first individuals who publicly advocated women's right to education were Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819–1883), a Syrian writer located in Lebanon. This was further supported by Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī (1820–1890), the reformist, in Tunisia, two decades later as he argued that women needed to acquire formal education so that it would enable them to run their families effectively as well as raising their children. [6] Despite this being a small step, it proved crucial in the emancipation of the rights of women in the society, as well as supporting their education. The interests of women's education significantly increased and attracted other parties to join in the new move, which propelled education of women as one of the ways of empowering them for liberation.

By the late nineteenth century, the norm that had been established was that the dignity and morality of women could only be preserved through knowledge and education, and not through ignorance. This norm and principle are one of the reasons that the education of women was on the rise. It also helped middle-class women in overcoming their marginalization and exclusion from the society, which was marked by the confinement of women and their exclusion from the formal system of education that favoured and admitted the males only, initially. Women began overcoming this marginalization and exclusion through establishing and holding study circles in their homes, as well as informal literary meetings and groups. Additionally, some women pursued their higher education in Europe. This also enabled women to learn their right to education, as well as how they could use this education in participating in the liberalization movements and efforts. When they returned from Europe, the educated women would set up well-known salons and thus help in the establishment of print, literary circles, as well as printing presses within the Arab countries. This also formed the foundation for women to understand their roles and duties at their families, as well as fighting against marginalization and deprivation of rights such as access to education on their

gender basis.

### III. QĀSIM AMĪN: TAHRĪR AL-MAR'AH (THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN)

Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908) was from an aristocratic family that was in power in Kurdistan in the early-nineteenth century, before relocating to Alexandria, Egypt, and this is where Amīn was born. [7] At the age of 18, he graduated from the Khedival School with a degree in law, before being recruited in the high ranks within the military in Isma'īl's army.

He also became a regular visitor at the Cairene coffeehouse Matatya. He was accompanied by other figures such as Adīb Ishāq (1856-1885) and Sa'd Zaghlūl (1857-1927). They would initiate discussions regarding the Aḥmad 'Urābī's 1880 uprising that was staged against Khedive Tawfiq. [7] Later in 1881, Amīn was supported by a four-year grant by the government which saw him leave for France to go and study at the College of Montpellier. It was at this college that he got conversant with the Western legal and political thought. This enabled him to learn more of the French culture and ideologies, as well as their approach to issues such as education for women and women rights. [8] These are some of the ideas he would borrow and take back with him to his motherland after his four years of study. [7] He was also employed by the magazine *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā* (The Solid Bond), besides working as a special translator of Muḥammad Abduh (1849-1905) during that time he stayed in France. Again, this was crucial as he got an opportunity to learn more about the French culture, politics, social welfare, and societal structure. [9]

He returned to Egypt in 1885, with the ambition of helping women push for their rights and educational rights. He was ambitious that he would initiate initiatives such as what he had witnessed while in France. [10] He also got married to a daughter of Pasha Khaṭṭāb, thus becoming a member of the Egyptian aristocratic family, before being elected a judge since he had the necessary legal qualifications for the position. 14 years later, he initiated his plans of revolutionizing women's educational rights and general rights by launching his otherwise infamous work *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah*. Unfortunately, the work was received with heated and severe criticism especially by most of the leading newspapers in Egypt. He devoted his work to the conditions guiding the aristocratic Egyptian women since he considered them idle, ignorant, and in need of educational guidance. What really sparked the criticism was his approach to the idea, as it was perceived as lack of respect to the aristocracy and women. However, his line of thought was that reforming the nation would start with reforms to the women as well as the role that they played in the family. He argued that secluding and denying women access to quality and formal education within the extended patriarchal homestead would render them incapable of raising children who were competent, especially the male children, who were expected to take over the leadership realms of the nation at some point [10]. In this case, he believed in empowering women through formal education. At that time, the high level of ignorance among the women

had contributed to the reproduction of decadent traditions as well as archaic values, which he believed could only be wiped through formal education among women. But before women could be granted access to public life and formal education, Amīn suggested that there was a need to change some aspects of seclusion and veiling if this was to be actualized [11]. He also argued that women's hands and face needed to be free from any unnecessary obstructions and coverings. He further claimed that the Quran had no provision for the covering and veiling of the palms or hands. [12] From what he had observed in the Western culture, he argued that women who were not secluded succeeded in gaining the skills that they required to manage their lives and families successfully regardless of whether they were educated or not. However, the criticism posed against the *Tahrīr* resulted from the fact that most of the people did not understand its importance, why it was produced, the group that it targeted, as well as the political discourses and social groups that it served. Today, it would be wrong to just reiterate that the *Tahrīr* was aimed at establishing a new gender structure or that it was meant to be a milestone in the women's path to independence and emancipation. [11] It played a major role, much more beyond its importance to the aristocratic women of Egypt. For instance, it was considered the origin of new opportunities for the Arab women across such aspects as race, ethnicity, region, and class.

There are also four elements that could be considered to enhance understanding of how the *Tahrīr* contributed to the educational rights of women, as well as who was targeted by the approach. [13] In the first approach Amīn argued that the nationalist reform could be achieved through the cooperation of the upper-class patriarchy if it were reformed, but this did not mean that he wanted all practices of seclusion and veiling reformed. He portrayed women as the shapers and nurturers of the men and leaders of the nation, whose growth and educational development and advancement would mean success to the whole country. Egypt's current story is one composed of updated gendered consciousness and male control, characterized by conditional liberties for women within their domestic domains.

The second aspect is that Amīn's call for a partially ameliorated, improved patriarchy was one way of exposing the cultural backwardness of the archetypal harem through which the Europeans attacked the people, and thus teaching inferior human qualities in Arab society. [14] This suggests that *Tahrīr* was both an ideological and political commentary that sought to expose the misinformed beliefs about the colonized Egyptian society; it was perceived to be beyond cultural repair, as well as being inferior. Amīn envisaged a civilizing force that aimed at changing the relationship that existed between the male elite members of the society and their women, most of whom were illiterate. This idea was further supported by Abd Allāh Nabhān, who explored the growing importance of the existing state in the post-colonial Egypt, and this is what Amīn advocated during his campaigns and initiatives. As the country grew and developed, its new gender discourse advanced the idea that women played a crucial role

in economic and social growth, and so they deserve to be granted equal educational opportunities and access as men.

The third aspect is that the work was written by a male modernist and it was addressed to Arab men, especially in the traditional aristocracy in the late Ottoman Egypt in which women were required to observe different faces of seclusion and veiling. [15] The social stratum at that time was undergoing significant changes and it was eventually, albeit gradually, overcome by the nationalist modernists who were for the rights of women as well as the elimination of exclusion and the veiling of women. It is also notable that Amīn's work became more significant because he was a judge, making him a distinguished official of the state, as well as being one of the aristocrats. This also explains why the book that he released was a shock to the Egyptian society. However, this shock was only experienced by the traditional landed aristocracy since they had failed to realize that it would be beneficial to modernize its control over women. It would also enhance its image as well as social position and how it related to the British people. In this regard, *Tahrīr* had a significant effect and influence on the educated male population as well as the men who were in working class; they knew the contents of the ideology indirectly. In most cases, such men barely had their women veiled or secluded; if they had to, it was done partially. Amīn also denounced conservative political leaders as well as dignitaries who were opposed to the initiatives that were aimed at changing the existing, old social norms [12]. He aimed at enabling his fellow men to understand that some of the traditional norms had been initiated to serve the interests of their predecessors. As such, they were to be considered transient as well as being incompatible with the norms of the 1900s. He was also staunch in insisting that the *shar'iah* was inconstant; despite the fact that it was based on human and social praxis, it was mutable so that it would accommodate new conditions without necessarily violating any fundamentals of Islam.

The fourth element is the print culture, and its value was well understood by the prominent *qāḍī*. It contributed significantly to forcing the learned men in Egypt to take note. [16] During this period, there was a culture of female literacy that was blossoming in Egypt, and this led to Beth Baron, a professor of history, to make insightful conclusions on the same in her book, "The Women's Awakening in Egypt" [9]. This also proved that the upper-class women had the capacity to author novels, biographical dictionaries, translated works, as well as contributing to domestic literature. Additionally, the print culture was initially exclusively accessible to the male literati, and this played a crucial role in the dissemination of Amīn's version of *Tahrīr* since, during this time, the female voice could exert more modest owing to their distinct class conditions as well as personal experiences. This enabled them to exert modest incremental limitations on the authority that was exercised by men. At this time, most of the women who had acquired formal education and were working had already managed to overcome veiling and seclusions and were pushing for the rights of their fellow women especially those who did not manage to acquire formal education. [16] It is

also notable that the reaction to *Tahrīr* cannot be entirely interpreted based on the manner in which Amīn espoused the Western ideas but rather how the ideas were applied in Egypt and their contribution in reforming the society, as well as how different class levels received them. Further, it would be utterly wrong to consider *Tahrīr* as a reflection of the overall conditions of the women in the aristocracy, or an interpretation of what the veiling practices meant. In this case, it is worth noting that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the veiling practices shifted from being insignias of class and became status that signalled confinement and backwardness. [17] This is an indication that the interpretation and meaning attached to the veiling practices changed as people became more and more enlightened, albeit by the modern and European education and culture adopted during and after the colonial period.

Today, most speakers believe that they could recapture the rhetoric of the women's progress through evoking the spirit of *Tahrīr*. However, it still stands doubtful whether or not the Egyptian movement aimed at proposing both fundamentals that would yield political and legal gains for women through the conference that was hosted. [17] The selective and conditional developments that were permitted by the state officials during the time could be gleaned through the statements that were made by Amina al-Jundi, who was the Minister of Social Affairs in Egypt. He explained that the Egyptian government had formulated a plan that would be implemented to help in solving the challenges that women were facing. One of the main problems faced by women that the plan aimed at solving was the issue of clitorrectomy. The government has also utilized this opportunity of state feminism to act as an alternative to the literalist Islamists; it also constantly defines the rights of women as it seeks to acquire popularity in doing the same. [18] In this case, it is also notable that when the language of liberation is interpreted to mean controlling demographic explosion as well as dispersing the appeal of Islam groups, this is when the government chips in to adopt the meaning and support the idea. It should also be remembered that in most of the policies that have been formulated concerning fighting the rights of women, the government has appeased the Islamists in different ways, not even in family law, which would be considered the least in this case.

#### IV. REDISCOVERING WOMEN'S HISTORIES

Beyond the connection between Amīn's time and the current times, the role of *Tahrīr* in the emancipation of women or even lack of it, creating a forum when the conditions of women in different national lines would be evaluated, and the women would be allowed to narrate their histories and experiences regarding political control as well as their personal freedom.

The conference created a forum for various groups, but two groups utilised this opportunity to voice their marginal voice and raise issues; the working-class of women and the Islamist women (these included the militant, reformist, or traditionalist women). The Islamist position was represented through the representatives of the official state-propagated Islam. Such

representatives included 'Afaf al-Najjar; she was a professor teaching Islamic studies at al-Azhar. [18] Together with other panellists, they established that there were two classes of Islamists; one group was enlightened, albeit due to education, while the other group was male-tailored, dark, and reactionary. Gaber 'Asfour argued that since Islam was the religion followed by the majority of the population, it should not have been considered an obstacle to the progress and development of women. He also added that Islam has nothing to do with hindering women from exercising their economic, social, and political rights. On the contrary, he added that the conservative and rigid interpretations of Islam that were coined were what should have been considered as a threat to the progress of women; Islam was associated with suppression, defeat, impotence, and backwardness. Such distortions of the meaning and interpretation of Islam were aimed at derailing the progress of women, as well as painting Islam as a dark religion that hindered women from achieving their rights. Salma Khadra al-Jayyusi, an Arab-American translator and anthropologist, also supported the idea that Islam was not to blame for the backwardness and stagnation that it was associated with during that time. [19] She also noted that this was evident due to the fact that there were millions of veiled women who had invaded public space, attained university degrees, as well as assuming paid positions in different fields in the job market. Al-Jayyusi also supported the idea of common panellists who believed that employment and education were the two most significant criteria that should be used in measuring progress and development among the Arab women. [19] She also evaluated the possible ways of separating the issue of veiling from the progress of Arab women as well as their pursuit of liberation and modern goals without necessarily having to examine the full range of veiling practices that were practiced in the urban and rural Arab societies or even the different impacts that these practices had on the sexuality of women and the control they had over their bodies. Al-Najjar also dismissed the feminist interpretations of the scriptures and upheld the universal and obligatory nature of veiling, which she claimed is applicable anytime and anywhere. [19] She also expressed her support for the Quranic truism that argues that women are by nature inferior to men due to their being deficient in both faith and intellect; they are described in the Quran as being "*nāqishāt*". This also showed that most of the speakers considered revivalist Islam in its various aspects as an anathema to the progress and development of women.

Review of this literature shows that several trends exist, but they have different characteristics. The trends mainly depend on the internal social system within which functioned over time. As such, their approaches towards the issue of feminism, women development and growth, and educational rights are different. [20] However, most of the modern Islamist movements that have been formed have faced opposition and criticism, but they have also established new and narrow definitions of gender relations. This has also helped in their organizing all aspects of male control over the sexuality of women, labour, as well as reproduction. The picture has also

been made even more complex by some native Islamist movements which have co-opted the versions of feminism which have led to either false or partial sense of the female empowerment. According to the conferees, women have been subjected to a systematic and multi-faceted oppression which has also been accompanied by the failed attempts of the women to reverse the conditions and the situation at large [20]. Women fought on two different fronts; the first front involves fighting against male chauvinists who are opposed to the idea of gender equality, while the second front involves women who take the initiative of acting on the very social norms that have been undermining the position of women in the society. Such include norms that are against educational equality and rights for the women. This was a contribution, primarily from the experience of women and individuals championing the rights of women, deliberated since the colonial period. Further, women fighting for the rights are guided by the principle that those of them who have internalized the precepts of utter submission are the ones that lack courage.

#### V. MEASURING PROGRESS

During the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial era, individuals who advocated the rights of women argued that the two central expressions that could help in achieving such success were employment and education. For instance, a Lebanese scholar by the name Dalal al-Bizri established that even though women carry great burdens and suppression, they usually show continuous improvement of their social conditions [21]. They also tend to manipulate the law so that it could benefit them, and they end up achieving most of the goals that they set in such cases.

A Western scholar, Cynthia Nelson, noted that one thing is missing in the development of women education that would help in the creation of new principles of freedom for the women as well as freedom for men [21]. In this regard, a hypothesis emerged that aimed to dislodge the myth that women working in the media sector have already acquired equality with their male counterparts in terms of employment benefits and salary. This hypothesis was demystified by Najwa Kamil, an Egyptian writer who proved that women working in the press sector continued facing problems related to the nature of the work that they do, and discrimination in terms of salaries and benefits; their male counterparts would get high salaries and more benefits despite doing equal and similar amounts of work [21].

Another aspect that has been used in assessing the progress of women since the colonial time is their level of political participation as well as leadership. In this regard, an Egyptian political scientist called Muna Makram Ubayd noted that most of the Arab political parties and movements aim at espousing women's rights such as equality and equal access to education [22]. However, sometimes these movements and parties are exploited for male political gains. This implies that there is a need for women to establish their own political discourse if their cause is to be viable.

A conference was also conducted on 'Women and

Authority', which was chaired by Hisham Sharabi. The panellists participating in the round table concluded that the country had emerged to be a major culprit regarding the regressive situation of women. [22] It was also during this time that the issue of underrepresentation of women in their local parliament, political parties, as well as organizations was raised. Similarly, Nimah Khalid also stated that even in Palestine, activism advocating the rights of women was higher as compared to that in Lebanon. [22] However, it was ironical that there were very few women in the Palestinian Union of Women, which was tasked with pushing for the rights of women in the country. The subordination of women to the male authority was seen to have significant psychological impacts on women. This was also considered as the basis of the myth that women are mentally inferior to men. Such myths then end up as self-fulfilling prophecies. She noted that this has grown increasingly evident among the Arab women. This is because, despite that they are given leadership positions and well as leadership roles that enable them to participate in key decision-making, they also continue feeling defeated even within the parties or organizations.

On top of the discussions that are centred on employment and education, there are hardly any researchers or speakers who have analysed the transformations that continue to take place in the women's material conditions in either urban or rural settings. [23] It is notable that such transformations have the capacity to initiate decisive improvement in the women's political power, social status, as well as personal freedom. This is also evident since there is hardly any literature on the aspirations and opportunities of the women working in the industrial and peasant labour. The conditions that lead to the transformation of a family, gender relations, patriarchal patterns of control, women's market and domestic labour, gender relations, class division, as well as state policies all play a crucial role in assessing the conditions of women, the kind of struggles that they face, as well as the extent to which they struggle in their push for liberation. [23]

Violence was seen to have been inflicted upon women at the global level, as well as the case during the colonial period. In the Arab countries, the penal code, referred to as the *qānūn al-ʿuqūbāt*, has been applied in protecting women against aggressions and abuse from the males. Jumah advocated the establishment of what she referred to as 'havens' that would address issues relating to domestic violence by offering the victims supports and rehabilitation. Additionally, most of the laws that were introduced during that time and are being applied today are considered contrary to the agreements that the Arab states have signed to participate in promoting the human rights of women. Hasan al-Banna's brother, Jamal al-Banna, also supported the idea that mere reading of the religious text was not enough to enable women to fulfil their political rights. The tradition also led to them losing real opportunities that they could use for self-actualization. This was also one of the factors that led to women realizing the importance of being aggressive in their fight for their rights as well as equality. [24] During a conference held regarding the same, Laila Othman, a Kuwaiti novelist, was shouted down by

the crowd due to her beliefs. She argued that it was unnecessary for anti-feminist groups to join forces with powerful political parties in pushing for the rights of women. This was detrimental to the advancement and development of women; this opinion was received with criticism from a section of the audience that had attended the event. Such groups have since been intervened in curriculums in schools. As a result, they have turned into rigid conservative educational programs. In an interview in which *al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah* was interviewed and the same published by the conference, Othman narrated that she had endured harassment by some extremist Islamists who had branded her novels as being pornographic. She was among the many Arab women novelists to have been subjected to the same, with their works being eagerly waited for extremist Islamists. [25] They are used to expose how the female intellectuals are causing a degradation of the Arab Muslim society due to their purported moral decadence. Several women novelists have also received similar threats. However, this has not hindered their push for their rights as well as equality.

#### VI. EMPOWERMENT OR ISOLATION

Literature has also weighed in on the issue of empowerment vs. isolation of women regarding their efforts to achieve equality and recognition in the society. According to Salwa Bakr, an Egyptian novelist, the male stigmas and biases that are prevalent within the Arabic language reflect the deep-seated gender inequalities that are present in the Arab society at large. [26] Despite the fact that this issue has been supported by numerous panellists, they raised differing opinions on whether or not there was a need to initiate a transformation of gender structure within the society or language itself, and whether or not altering the language itself would help in enhancing gender awareness. This was also evident during the period immediately after colonization as the society became aware of the need to push for the rights of women and gender equality in the society. However, the only obstacle, in this case, was whether to transform the society or language structure and the impact either of the two choices would have on gender awareness. [27] Regarding this, a Jordanian critic and poet, it was proposed that the society should pursue a new consciousness of language as their approach to social reform as well as seeking gender equality. She argued that eliminating some grammatical rules that promoted the dominance of men in the society would enable men to understand the frustrations that they make women go through due to their actions, power, and control. However, author Hussa Munif was against the idea of feminizing the Arabic language, claiming that this would not be a genuine sense of gender equality, and it would lead to ease in overlooking the discriminations staged against the women in the society [27].

A parallel debate was initiated around literature during a roundtable meeting that was chaired by Sabri Hafiz, a renowned professor of Arabic literature. The difference of opinion was regarding whether to support female literature or humanitarian literature which were presented as separate and

distinct entities. For instance, Elias Khoury, a Lebanese novelist, was for the idea that women writers needed to stop the kind of literature they were doing since it focused on the emotional defence of the rights of women. [28] He was for the idea that such writers needed to join the mainstream and define their private concerns as well as present their conditions imaginatively and critically. This showed an overarching generalization of the emotionality of women novelists, as well as little or no appreciation for their varied ideological and social concerns. [28] As such, Khoury's invitation for female novelists to join the mainstream was in fact a way of luring women to join a male dominated mainstream. This push implied that female literature was not considered viable. However, women novelists such as Hanan al-Shaykh defended their position and role in the society by arguing that their discarding of their feminist/feminine writing would imply that there is no one left to continue writing about the experiences of women before, during, and after the colonial period. The literature critics demanding the production of humanitarian literature and elimination of feminine literature were described as absurd since they were seeking to stop women from writing about the oppressive conditions to which they are exposed. However, Muhammad Baradah, a Moroccan critic and novelist, argued that it was necessary to establish an approach through which women's literature would be evaluated exclusively. [29] Unlike Khoury's views, Baradah's position on the idea raises the concern whether such views are aimed at improving gender consciousness in the society or they promote further gender segregation that would eventually disregard women's literature and then eventually banish it. It was also considered that female literature should continue since women have suffered for a long time due to intellectual confinement and narrow spaces, and it is only them (women) that can free themselves from this marginalization, albeit through literature and actions. Hanan al-Shaykh also corroborated this idea by arguing that it is shameful that mean characterize their literature as *nisā'ī*—feminine. [29] However, she was proud of feminist literature and embraced it.

#### VII. RECONFIGURATION OF THE RELATIONS EXISTING BETWEEN THE ARAB AND WESTERN FEMINISM

According to Cynthia Nelson, the interaction between the Arab society, and the Western modernization was responsible for the introduction of new ideas on justice as well as women's rights. [30] However, she argued that the Arab feminist movement was not just a replica of the Western precedent even though the main expression of the colonial period was the call and demand for equal rights for men and women. Similarly, Anwar Mughith, who was a professor at the University of Halwan in Cairo, argued that the women's movement was crucial because it created the best forum for civilizations and cultures to interact. He also added that the Arab women's movement interacted with the American and European counterparts on three levels. [30] The first of these levels is the philosophical level, which emphasizes the fundamental aspects and concepts of human rights and

freedom. The second level is the moral level, which ideally proposes that women's liberation should be considered one of the ways of triumphing good against evil. He further explained that the confinement of women to the patriarchal household is one of the ways of limiting their abilities. As such, women needed to be allowed to take part in work outside the house, since it would transform them into fulfilled and complete human beings as advocated by Fāris al-Shidyāq and Muḥammad 'Abduh. The third level of interaction is in relation to the social value that is given to the liberation of women in the society in the Arab world. In explaining this level, Mughith echoed the ideas of other conferees, in which he reminded everyone that it was colonialism that led to the feminist Arab discourse attaining a suspicious overtone as a manifestation of colonial control and penetration. [30]

'Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, who was a history professor at UCLA, contributed to the debate in discussing three central elements within the American feminist movement. [31] The three elements are the emphasis of women having control over their bodies such as choosing in marriage or even choosing to remain single, the extent of the authority of women in comparison to that of men, as well as women's access to job opportunities as well as equal material rights with men. The American feminism was based on the argument that liberation was not complete without women achieving equality with men. Marsot also observed that as long as men continued monopolizing the centres of political power, the economy, and the legal system, equality could just otherwise be deemed an illusion. As such, Marsot argues that women need to pursue and achieve some form of progress since ultimately freedom is an otherwise relative issue. [18] Similarly the idea that it was impossible to discuss the concept of feminism in isolation from the Western context which had produced it was endorsed. He also added that there was a real concern for the rights of women in the Arab world. Al-Bahir also observed that the Western feminist movements looked down upon the Arab feminist movements and considered them as backward and unable to make decisions on their own. The perceptions that the European feminists had on the Arab women was based on the self-other dichotomy; the 'self' is considered as domineering and advanced, while the 'other' is considered inferior and backward even when it is possession of its own important and invaluable economic resources.

The Western feminist movement was still the best model for imitation, as it was formulated and operated especially during the Renaissance period. She also noted that imitation would create problems because the West was obviously more advanced and had multiple, contradictory models as regarding the status and goals of women. Her perception was that she was living in a time that was not as prepared as Amīn's regarding receiving modernity (*al-ḥadāthah*), justifying her claim by stating that the land had already lost its originality. However, she conceptualized the historical change depending on the levels of absorption of 'tradition' versus 'modernity' as well as how they could be gauged by the Arab *turāth* culture. [32] She argued that there were several cultural layers that had piled above the otherwise 'traditional' and that the 'modern'

before political Islam had risen to complicate how Arab related to modernity.

It is also important to appreciate the existence of a variety of Islamist as well as feminist-Islamist movements and ideologies. [32] Most of these movements came into existence following the interaction of women in the Arab world with the colonialists or due to receiving formal education, which laid the foundation for women fighting for their rights and pushing for equal rights with men. Acquisition of formal education thus played a crucial role, and so does the contribution of novelists and critics.

#### VIII. MUḤAMMAD 'ABDUH AND RELIGIOUS REFORMERS

Muḥammad 'Abduh was born into a family of peasants living in the Lower Egypt in 1849. He learned under a private tutor and later became a reciter of the Quran. [33] At the age of 13, his parents sent him to the Aḥmadī mosque, one of the largest educational institutions in the country at that time. However, he later quit learning and got married. He also enrolled at al-Azhar University in 1866. [33] At the university, he studied philosophy, logic, and Islamic mysticism. He also studied under Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, who was a philosopher, as well as a Muslim religious reformer. He used his leadership position to resist the oppression of women as well as the European colonialism. Due to the influence, he gained from his time at al-Afghānī, 'Abduh's career was a combination of politics, journalism, and his fascination as he sought to achieve mystical spirituality in Islam. His experience at al-Afghānī was crucial as it taught him about the challenges and problems that were faced in Egypt and the Islamic world at large. It also enabled him to learn some of the technological achievements that were achieved in the West. [33]

In 1877, 'Abduh was awarded the degree of 'Ālim (teacher), which allowed him to start teaching logic, ethics, and theology at al-Azhar. Later in 1878, he got promoted through his appointment as the professor of history at Cairo's teachers' training college, Dār al-'Ulūm, which was to be later incorporated into Cairo University. [34] He later got employed at the Khedival School of Languages teaching Arabic, as well as editing the official state newspaper, *al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣrīyah*. He was also ambitious about reforming the Egyptian society in all its aspects, and he held on to the belief that education was the best way through which he could achieve this goal. [35] He also advocated a good religious education, because he considered it as the best way through which the morals of the child would be strengthened. [34] He also considered scientific education to be important so that it would nurture the ability of the children to think critically. [36] In most of the articles that he published in the newspaper, he criticized various forms of civil and social evil such as superstition, corruption, as well as the luxurious lives that the rich lived at the expense of the poor.

Later in 1882, his radicalization led to him crossing paths with the British, and thus he was exiled from the country for six years due to his unwavering support for the Egyptian nationalist revolt that was led by Aḥmad 'Urābī in 1879. [37] It was argued that every society should be granted the freedom

to choose the type of government that they considered suitable for their governance, based on their history as well as present circumstances. It is also notable that Abduh spent most of his years in Ottoman Lebanon. He also helped in establishing an Islamic educational system in Lebanon.

#### IX. THOUGHT

Muhammad 'Abduh claimed that it would be wrong for the Muslims to overly rely on the interpretations of texts that were provided by medieval clerics; they were advised to use reason so that they would keep up with the ever-changing times. [37] He also argued that in Islam, the doctrine was not that man was created so that he would be led by a bridle; instead, God gave mankind the intelligence that he could use and so that he could be guided by knowledge. 'Abduh's thought was also that the primary role of a teacher was directing men towards the right approaches of study. His belief was that Islam encouraged and helped men to get detached from the world of their ancestors. [37] As such, he used this reasoning to support the idea that Islam was one of the ways of reproving the slavish imitation of tradition. He also claimed that there were two primary possessions that related to religion and that which man was graced with when he was created. The two are the independence of will and then the independence of thought and opinion. [38] It was these tools that Muhammad 'Abduh used to achieve and retain happiness and satisfaction. He also believed that the growth that was evident in the western civilization in Europe was attributed to proper utilization and application of these two principles. [39] He also thought that the Europeans were motivated to act since most of them had the independence and capacity to exercise their choice and make decisions. They would also use their reasoning in seeking out facts with their minds. However, 'Abduh was regarded as an infidel by his Muslim opponents. On the other hand, his followers considered him a sage, a reforming leader, as well as a reviver of religion due to the role that he placed in reviving religion as well as its application in the liberation of women. [40] He is mainly addressed as "al-ustādh al-Imām" and "al-Shaykh al-Muftī". In his works, he also portrays God as always educating humanity right from the childhood to youth and to adulthood. According to his beliefs and thoughts, Islam was the only religion that was built on dogmas that could be proven by reasoning. In this case, it is also notable that he does not advocate Islam to return to its early stages. This is because he opposed some of the practices that dehumanized women such as polygamy, and he considered it an archaic custom that needed to be wiped off the Islam practices. He also believed that Islam was the only way through which men and women could be liberated from enslavement. The rights of all human beings would be guaranteed and would help in abolishing the monopoly of scholars on exegesis, as well as the abolishment of religious compulsion and racial discrimination.

Another reason as to why Muhammad 'Abduh was considered a successful reformer is because he preached harmony between all Muslims sects. He achieved this by preaching the spirit of brotherhood between all schools that

taught Islam in the area. However, he never hesitated to condemn what to him appeared as errors like superstitions that were derived from the popular Sufism. Muhammad 'Abduh would also regularly call for better friendship and relationships to be sustained between all religious communities. Since Christianity was the second most populous religion that was practised in Egypt during that time, Muhammad 'Abduh dedicated his special time and efforts in seeking to establish friendship and good relations between the Christians and the Muslims. Such are the efforts that made him go into books as a reformer.

#### X. WOMEN'S LIBERATION BETWEEN SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES

This section explores the divisions that existed between the Islamist and secularist rights activists in the Arab world. [41] Despite the fact that both the Islamists and secularists stood firm to defend their Egyptian identity, reject the imposition and adoption of the Western denominations, as well as agreeing on the various obstacles that hinder the movements pushing for the liberation of women, the two sides seem to be divided on the strategies and methods that should be used in seeking the rights of women. [41]

Islamists are for the opinion that the women's liberation movement in Egypt should first be de-secularized and then Islamised. According to Riham Bahi, the focus of the Islamists is to make the Islamic feminism a hegemonic discourse of the movement for of liberation of women. [42] This is because they believe that the secularist ideology has failed in its attempt to ensure the same, as well as bringing freedom and liberations to the women in Egypt as well as other Arab countries. The Islamists also believe that the secularists lack the capacity to provide reliable and lasting solutions to the problems facing the Egyptian women. The claim that secular ideology had failed to provide reliable and long-lasting solutions to Egyptian women emerged in popular discourse among the Islamists. This is evident in the manner and approaches that Kawther al-Kholy used in explaining an approach that could help in solving the challenges and problems that women were facing. [42] She explained that from her personal experience, she had enjoyed the relief from the ideology of secularism that women enjoyed. She argued that since the elimination of the secularism approach, she had noticed that women tend to enjoy Islamist social events more than they did with the secularist ones. They also tend to feel more comfortable when issues of the Islamic discourse are addressed as a solution to the problems that women were facing in the Egyptian society.

The Islamists are also guided by the belief that the Islamist activists of women's rights should be given the opportunity to take part in the Egyptian social and political arena so that they could help in transforming the society through the implementation of their solutions and ideas. During the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution that took place in 1952, the country was subjected to the leadership and governance of a secular dictatorship. Since that time, it has been difficult for the Islamist women in the country to be given the opportunity



to take leadership positions, including leading their own women's liberation movements. During an interview conducted with Riham Bahi, the respondent kept stating that it was the turn of the Islamist women to rise to power and take control of the leadership of the country. Further, the crackdown conducted against Islamists after the Egyptian military coup in 2013 led to the augmentation of the feeling of ideological differences being evident between secularism and Islamism among the two divides of Islamists. The Islamist participants believed that the secular ideology should be scrapped off since it is a form of oppression.

Islamists such as Fawkia Ayad also expressed their fear of the secular regime by arguing that being an Islamist in Egypt is risky since it exposes one to the possibility of remaining under constant surveillance by the secret authorities in the country. It also exposes one to the risk of being convicted on the charges of terrorism. [43] Further, since the Islamist denied taking part in the political field when the secular political party rose to power after the 2013 military coup, the Islamist women's rights activists are of the opinion that the secular regime oppresses women due to the fact that they refused to support the regime after the coup.

Amira El-Hefnawy is also of a similar opinion as she claims that the status of the Muslim women in Egypt has worsened since the military took over. Since 2013 when the military coup took place, not all women in the country suffer at the same level. She claims that Islamist women suffer more than the rest due to their ideologies and beliefs, as well as failure to support the secularist regime. This has led to the situation that they are being subjected to arbitrary arrests as well as arbitrary detentions based on how one looks. Some of them are even arrested because of going to the mosque or even wearing the veil.

The Islamists believe that their ideology towards the liberation of women is a modern ideology and that it fits the culture and trends in the modern time Egypt. Amany Saleh adds that the Islamist women represent a new and modern version of Islam that is updated with the current times and thus it is capable of providing solutions to the issues and problems that women are facing in Egypt. [44] The new Islamic ideology is also based on a reinterpretation of the Quran and attempts to integrate such interpretation into the Islamic jurisprudence through analysis of the philosophical rationale of the Islamic law as well as the procedures that are applied to all cases involving solving women's cases. These women also claim that the new Islamic feminist ideology is effective due to its provision of more leniency and flexibility than secular ideology. As Amany Saleh stated: Secularists stuck to the old secularist ideology without evolving and adjusting it according to the modern needs of the women in the country. The Islamist women's rights activists also believe that the Islamist feminist ideology is more than just the issue of dualism as it attempts to avoid the occurrence of binary oppositions such as Eastern vs. Western or even Islamism vs. secularism. For instance, Riham Bahi notes that the Islamist activists are fond of criticizing their counterpart secularists because of the attitude that they have against the Islamists. [44] This also shows the broader

criticisms that the Islamists had on the traditional secular discourse, which also shows a single way of interpreting and understanding Islam.

The Islamist women's rights activists also claim that the secular women's rights activists use an approach that has been established to limit the contribution as well as the participation of the Islamic women in the social, economic, and political aspects of the society. [45] The Islamist participants also believe that since the Egyptian society is dominated by the Islamic culture, it is fundamental to use the Islamic discourse when pursuing the liberation of women as this would help in attracting as well as welcoming Islamic activists and then enhancing understanding of the specific needs of the women in the society. In this regard, Alkholy stated that when secular women appear in the Egyptian society to present their solutions regarding the challenges and problems that women are facing, they are mostly rejected on the account that the society considers them not to be part of the Egyptian society and that they have different ideologies that are not related to the Egyptian culture. [45] They are argued to be destroying the Egyptian culture through poisoning the mind of the Egyptian people with the Western methods and ideologies as advocated by their approach to activism and fight for the rights of women in the society.

The Islamists also believe that whether the secularists are guided by Western ideologies or Westernized, the secular message that they pass to the society is perceived by the Egyptian people as a form of Westernization, hence rejecting the discourse. [46] Using any form of Western terminologies or even examples as the secularists do is considered by the Egyptian people as a way of conforming to the belief that the secular ideology is Westernized. This is in line with claims that the secularists mainly cited the provisions of the United Nations charter when pushing for the rights of women. However, the Egyptian population considers these citations as a form of their culture being intruded upon by the Western culture.

On the contrary, the Islamists argue that the Islamic discourse is a local discourse that emerges from the local Egyptian culture. This is because the Islamic feminists address the Egyptian people in a language that is easy and comfortable for them to understand. [47] Further, the Egyptian people consider the Islamist women's rights activists to be part of their local Egyptian culture since they do not imitate or even emulate the ideas and criteria of the West. Amany Saleh argues that they are using authentic criteria that were drafted and rooted in the authentic Egyptian heritage. The Islamists also pass the message to the people that their rights should be based on the will of God and not as determined by the United Nations charter. Additionally, the activists appreciate that women living in poverty are the ones most in need of the services of the liberation movement. [47] As a result, such women have increasingly become attached to the Islamic culture and discourse rather than finding their identity in the secular discourse. This is because they consider the Islamic discourse to be more familiar as well as easier to identify with and understand the doctrines.

As Amany Saleh stated that the Islamic activists talk about the ideology behind the liberation of women, since they value the importance of informing the people of the instrument that needs to be used if their efforts are to be effective. [48] Regarding this, they established that the most efficient instrument that they could deploy was talking to the public in a language that was familiar to them so that they could comprehend each detail of the plan and approach used. This was because the Islamic activists had noticed the skepticism that the people had of foreign ideologies as practiced by the secularist activists. Further, Amany explained that they mainly focused on talking to Egyptian women who are either illiterate or semi-illiterate and especially those who are poor. [48] To such women, it would make little or no sense at all to give illustrations of Eastern or Western secular women as the role models that they could emulate in the liberation of women in the local society. It is paramount to use examples from their own culture if they are to appreciate it.

It was also evident that the Islamists raised the issue of the fear of secularism within the culture as a crucial issue. [49] It was also evident that most Islamists are not opposed to the ideology of secularism, but rather the Egyptian secularists due to the manner in which they treated the Islamists, their approach to fighting for the rights of women, as well as mixing the local culture with the Western culture and practices. They also believe that the secularists have an aggressive attitude towards the Islamists and lack tolerance and openness to ideological differences and disagreement.

#### XI. SECULARISTS

According to the secularist women, the Islamic ideology is different from the Egyptian women's liberation movement. The secularist women argue that the influence that Islam has on the women's liberation movement in Egypt is a threat to the natural success and progress of the movement, which was initiated in the early nineteenth century. [50] For instance, secularist participants such as Ebtihal Salem, Safaa Abd Elmenem, Salwa Mohsen, Salwa Bakr, and Sahar Tawfiq laid the blame on the Islamist movement in the country for the deviation of the secular women's liberation movement for both political and social aims. According to Salem, the liberation efforts for the liberation of the Egyptian women were successful until Islamism came into the picture. She argued that Islam has played a crucial role in taking the Egyptian women back to the Dark Ages, in which they faced intense oppression and could not participate in the activities of the society. [50] This argument was supported by Sahar Tawfiq, who argued that it was because of Islamization of the Egyptian society and culture that women have increasingly become marginalized and isolated within Egypt. He claimed that the Egyptian Islamists are in opposition of the participation of women in politics, and thus they limit their participation to particular fields like teaching or becoming a family physician. However, this rejection of the Islamic liberation movement and the general Islamic ideology by secularists such as Salem and Sahar present to them a huge challenge. [51] They are faced with the challenge of ejecting

the Islamic ideology in a country and society whereby Islam is the dominant culture, has been deeply rooted in history, and this makes it a difficult mission. As such, the secularists are making attempts to separate Islam as a culture from Islam as a religious practice, and this is an uphill task for them to achieve.

The secularists describe the Islamists as radical when they apply Islam through which women are harmed, or work against their progress. [52] Any action that the Islamists carry out and fails to meet the standards of the secularists is considered as the stigma of extremism. It is also notable that there is a clear separation between Islam and the behaviour portrayed by extremist Muslims, and this is what gives the secularists a pretext that they use to reject and oppose the Islamization of the movements pursuing the liberation of women in the country. They believe that since Islam has already been radicalized by extremists, it should be excluded from the women's liberation movement altogether. [53]

The secularist women also refused to incorporate Islamic customs in the Egyptian culture. They argued that the Egyptian culture is rather secular as opposed to being Islamic and argued that the new trend of Islamic extremism was new in the Egyptian culture and society. [54] These secular participants are also of the belief that the Islamic tradition was an import into Egypt, and it was imported from other Islamic countries like Afghanistan. [54] The real issue is that the secularists accuse the Islamists of wanting the Egyptians to go back to the original and authentic Islamic culture so that they could advance towards modernism, as well as moving towards the liberation of women in the society. On the other hand, the secularists are opposed to this idea.

#### XII. CONCLUDING NOTE

Egypt here may potentially serve as a microcosm for the struggle between the secularists and the Islamists in the entire Arab and possibly the Islamic World. The Islamists, on one hand, believe in adhering to the core of Islam from a Golden Age but that core is often based on an invented history. Hence, to survive, they attempt to interpret some of Islam's position regarding women as modern while denying much of its oppressive tendencies. The Secularists, on the other hand, see the current practices of Islam as a threat to the advances that women have achieved through the apparatuses of the nation-state that stood up to the religious authorities and helped pass legislation that offered more liberty to women. The real issue, of course, was that neither group was willing to address important issues with some of the fundamental Islamic positions regarding the lack of equality and equity between men and women. Throughout the 20th century, the pendulum swung several times between the two poles. Only time will tell if it will settle down under the new conditions of globalization that have defined the beginnings of the 21st century.

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